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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 MINSK 000029

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PINR](#) [BO](#)
SUBJECT: BELARUS PERSONNEL RE-SHUFFLE: TAKING NO CHANCES

REF: 05 MINSK 1538

Classified By: Ambassador George Krol for Reasons 1.4 (B,D)

11. (C) Summary: In recent weeks Belarusian dictator Lukashenko has reshuffled several senior positions in his Presidential Administration (PA) and removed the Minister of Health. The odious Viktor Sheiman has moved from heading the Presidential Administration to running Lukashenko's presidential campaign while the equally notorious chief propagandist Oleg Proleskovskiy has left his post as one of Sheiman's PA deputies to become chief ideology advisor to Lukashenko. Health minister Ludmila Postoyalko, often referred to as Lukashenko's "mother-in-law" (she is the mother of Lukashenko's reputed mistress and personal doctor), was removed. Replacing Sheiman is the amiable but loyal Secretary of the Security Council General Gennadiy Nevyglas.

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Observers view the Sheiman and Proleskovskiy departures from the PA not as demotions but a clear sign Lukashenko wants his most loyal and ruthless supporters focused on ensuring his complete victory in the March elections with no chance of a Ukrainian style "revolution" occurring. Rumors abound that after the elections Sheiman and Proleskovskiy will be rewarded with perhaps higher and more lucrative government positions, perhaps as Prime Minister and deputy PM respectively. Right now, Lukashenko, though powerful and cognizant his opposition is weak and divided, still remains fearful of revolution occurring in Belarus. These appointments indicate he is taking no chances and is aggressively focusing the attention and energies of all elements of his regime -- from top to bottom -- on his re-election and retention of power. End summary.

12. (U) On January 4, President Lukashenko announced a reshuffling of several senior positions in his government. Head of the Presidential Administration Viktor Sheiman was relieved of his position and named to head Lukashenko's re-election campaign. Security Council head Gennadiy Nevyglas was appointed the new head of the PA. Deputy PA Heads Aleksandr Popkov and Oleg Proleskovskiy were dismissed, and Lukashenko appointed physicist Anatoly Rubinov as Deputy Head of the PA in charge of media and ideology. Proleskovskiy had previously been in charge of state ideology and considered the architect and driving force behind the regime's virulently anti-U.S. and pro-Lukashenko propaganda campaign in state media.

13. (U) On January 9, Lukashenko appointed Proleskovskiy as Presidential Aide-Head of the Main Ideological Department of the Presidential Administration. Proleskovskiy is now subservient to Rubinov on paper but in practice he may be even more powerful as proximity to Lukashenko usually means

greater power. In making these appointments, Lukashenko publicly tasked Rubinov and Proleskovskiy with strengthening the PA's ideological activities. The same day Lukashenko also dismissed Deputy PA Head Nikolai Ivanchenko and named him Presidential Aide-Chief Inspector for the Minsk region, replacing Vladimir Sinyakov, who became Head of the Presidential Administration's Personnel Management Office.

¶4. (C) These moves followed an earlier round of appointments in late December (reftel). Additionally, Minister of Health Ludmila Postoyalka was removed and appointed to the upper chamber of parliament. As the mother of Irena Abelskyaya, Lukashenko's reputed long time mistress and personal physician, Postoyalko has been called Lukashenko's mother-in-law and reportedly exercised great influence on her "son-in-law." But she has been suffering from cancer and the shift out may be an act of mercy although rumors circulate that Lukashenko and his mistress may have broken up. The lackluster and toadying former Minister of Culture Leonid Gulyako, removed in late December, was subsequently appointed head of the Council of Ministers Committee on Religious and Nationality Affairs, replacing the amiable Stanislav Buko (with whom we have worked on the Religious Freedom report), who has not been reassigned.

Post-Election Appointments Now

¶5. (U) On January 9, Lukashenko told the press he would continue to reshuffle the government, including restructuring several ministries. His announced goal is to have all the personnel in place to implement the new five-year plan, which began January 1, and to have all post-election appointments completed by the time elections are conducted in March. Confident of victory, Lukashenko also announced that Sheiman

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would take over the Security Council as soon as his re-election is complete. Rumors however circulate that Sheiman might receive a bigger and perhaps more lucrative reward as Prime Minister as many observers think current PM Sidorskiy's tenure may be coming to an end amid rumors he may be a potential Russian backed replacement for Lukashenko.

Fear is the Reason

¶6. (C) On January 12, Belarusian political analyst Valery Karbalevich told us there were three main reasons for the reshuffle: 1) Lukashenko is Belarus' sole decision maker. He trusts no one, is afraid and irrational, and therefore frequently reassigns senior officials to keep them from consolidating power; 2) calling early elections and placing Sheiman in charge of his re-election campaign shows Lukashenko wants to avoid any chance of a Ukraine-style revolution in Belarus; 3) Lukashenko sees his re-election as the top priority and is doing everything to ensure he remains in power.

¶7. (C) Karbalevich explained that as Lukashenko's right hand man, Sheiman brings immense power, resources and capacity to evoke fear to the Lukashenko campaign. In 2001, MP Nikolai Cherginets headed Lukashenko's campaign, but Karbalevich claimed no one fears Cherginets. However, the Presidential Administration has drafted a detailed plan for overwhelmingly winning the election. According to Karbalevich, at this stage, every region, state enterprise and university has been given a quota of signatures they must collect for Lukashenko. Karbalevich noted that the previous night his own landlady asked him to sign the petition for Lukashenko, claiming apartment bloc managers were given the order to solicit signatures for Lukashenko (we have heard this from others as well.) Karbalevich stressed that everyone fears Sheiman (who was implicated in the disappearances of prominent opposition

figures), and no one will want to explain to him why they did not fulfill their orders from him.

Followers, Not Thinkers

¶18. (C) Karbalevich continued that Lukashenko likes to surround himself with former military officers who will follow orders without thinking. Sheiman, Nevyglas and Proleskovskiy are all former military, border guard or BKGB officers. However, Karbalevich claimed Sheiman is a doer, not a manager, and was not an effective PA head. Nevyglas is considered a much better organizer. Also rumors circulate that Sheiman conflicted with deputy PA head Natalya Petkevich who is rumored to be close, even intimate, with Lukashenko. Petkevich will stay on as deputy head of the PA and it is thought she might become head of the PA if Lukashenko gives Nevyglas a high government ministerial position to solidify his personal control over what he still suspects is a disloyal government (as opposed to presidential) bureaucracy. It has also long been rumored that State Control Committee chairman Leonid Tozik, considered a Sheiman rival, might also be relieved as Sheiman solidifies his own position as a potential replacement for Lukashenko, if and when Lukashenko decides to step down.

¶19. (C) The new deputy PA Rubinov, as a non-military man, is a strange exception. Previously he was tasked by Lukashenko to reform the education system and control the granting of PhDs. Karbalevich claimed to know Rubinov, and said he shares Lukashenko's Sovietesque worldview, although he is not a fanatic "Lukashist." But he is no doubt a loyal trooper (Note: One of our Pol Section's FSNs claims to know Rubinov well. He asserts Rubinov is intelligent, honest, and friendly. He also said Rubinov's best friend for 40 years currently works at the U.S. Embassy as a cleaning lady!)

Conflict in the Ideology Department?

¶10. (C) Karbalevich found it odd that Proleskovskiy, a former BKGB officer who previously led the GOB's battle against the opposition and the West, was demoted to work under Rubinov, who has no ideological background. Karbalevich anticipates both Rubinov and Proleskovskiy could conflict with senior PA Deputy, Natalya Petkevich, who also has a hand in promoting state ideology and is rumored to be Lukashenko's new lover. But, Proleskovskiy's shift from the PA to becoming

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Lukashenko's personal advisor on ideology may actually increase his influence over the boss and his own power.

Rumors of More Appointments to Come

¶11. (C) Karbalevich passed on rumors that Prime Minister Sergey Sidorsky might be replaced after the elections. He said Sidorsky began to fall out of favor last year when some newspapers named him as a possible Russian-backed successor to Lukashenko. Sidorsky's effectiveness as a manager and his cleaner image abroad has made him popular among the government bureaucracy and therefore a threat to Lukashenko. When asked about rumors that Foreign Minister Sergey Martynov might be removed, Karbalevich claimed this is unlikely. Martynov fought tooth and nail to become minister, and claims to be one of the few in Lukashenko's inner circle (the others being Sheiman and CEC head Lidya Yermoshina). Lukashenko even gave Martynov a fancy home in the Drazdy presidential compound. However, Karbalevich claimed Martynov is not a Lukashenko fanatic, and is often uncomfortable defending Lukashenko's policies to the West. (Comment: We have never found Martynov very effective vis--vis Lukashenko. We

suspect he rarely delivers objective news to Lukashenko and has become a total apologist for Lukashenko's foreign policy failures. We have heard from other sources, including analyst Suzdaltsev, that Martynov might be relieved after the elections to be replaced by Lukashenko's long time personal assistant and Man Friday, Makei. This would reflect Lukashenko's effort to put suspected disloyal ministries under the control of people Lukashenko trusts more. Already we have seen an exodus of pro-western officials from the MFA to postings abroad in what appears to be an ideological cleansing campaign at MFA.)

Comment

¶12. (C) The current changes reflect Lukashenko's top priority is his re-election. He has placed his most loyal supporters in the campaign and has focused all the energies of the presidential vertical - from top to bottom, on the single goal of ensuring he remains in power.
Krol